

The Peacock Screen

by
*Fannie
Heaslip
Lea*

Author of
"H.R.H. Young"

ILLUSTRATIONS
by
*John
Newton
Howitt*



"IN A YEAR YOU WILL BE TWENTY-
FOUR. ALMOST AN OLD MAID," SAID
MRS. DE LA PUENTE."

BECAUSE Yvette was beautiful, men flattered her, and because men flattered her, Yvette was beautiful. Her dark eyes had the exquisite daring of the woman who knows she pleases. The blood came readily into her smooth pale cheek because admiring glances called it there; and her red flower of a mouth shaped itself easiest to smiling acceptance of broken hearts. It is a gracious

look and difficult of attainment to the plainer sisters.

Yvette, withal, was not invincible.

Back in the earlier days of her reign there had been a man, and while the man went—as men do—the memory remained. I mention this merely to open the way to other facts. Yvette had, then, beauty, prestige—and a past, of a delicate hidden sort. It was but natural that thus endowed, she should come eventually to consider matrimony.

Her mother—have I said that Yvette's mother was none other than Mrs. Jacques de la Fuente née Duprez—her mother, perhaps, stated the case most eloquently,

"In a year you will be twenty-four," she said, the beautiful limpid French softening and sweetening the words. "That is, almost an old maid. It is time, Yvette, you thought—I, myself, was married at fifteen."

Yvette touched her rosy nails with a chamois-skin, and sighed. She was standing at the moment before her dressing table, and the candles set in tall sconces on either side of that artistic bit of furniture afforded a mellow radiance to the mirror's depths.

"At fifteen," repeated the mother, a trifle insistently, "I was married."

"But from the cradle—to the grave!" said Yvette, and fastened a single string of pearls about her long white throat.

"What is it you say?" asked Mrs. de la Fuente somewhat sharply. She was not infrequently to be found some distance in the rear of her beautiful daughter.

"How you must have been bored!" said Yvette.

"In my trousseau," continued the lady, "I had, as you know, great quantities of real lace. The veil of my grandmother, alone——"

"Eh!" said Yvette, "it does not matter." She shrugged her slender shoulders. "I am quite willing to marry—but the man?"

Then Mrs. de la Fuente flung out a crafty feeler. "He has been most attentive," she murmured, "and there is no slightest fault to be found with his position, his name——"

"His money," thrust in Yvette, almost vulgarly. "Say it, mama! You mean Tony Whiting." She added with a little yawn, "I had thought of that, myself."

"He has perhaps spoken," said Mrs. de la Fuente rather eagerly.

"No!" said Yvette. "No,"—and finished superbly arrogant, "but he will speak to-night."

She drew on a pair of long white gloves, slipped into a long black velvet coat with a collar of fur, and extinguished the candles on the dressing table.

"What is it to-night?" she asked languidly. "'Faust'? If you knew how tired I am of that opera with its tenor who is just a grocer's boy in doublet and hose, and its so mysterious devil and its so silly Marguerite. Mind the stair, mama!"

And it came to pass, as they say in ancient chronicles, that Tony Whiting spoke that night. He had been wanting only the infinitesimal encouragement which Yvette

allowed him during the "Jewel Song." The box was very dark, and he sat just behind her, where his eyes could rest without ostentation upon the little curl that touched her neck. It was in his sight, perhaps, the sweetest thing about her—that little wayward, kissing curl. Once she dropped her fan, and when he stooped for it, her fingers fumbled delicately over taking it back. It is just such things which derail the train of otherwise quite prudent events.

In any case, Whiting spoke, in a slow, careful whisper, while Marguerite upon the stage trilled brassily above some bits of colored glass; she was a stout Marguerite, it may be hardly necessary to remark, with a vanishing waist line and three chins.

Tony Whiting's waist line was also being threatened, and the hair at his temples had yielded visibly to the persuasion of time, but he had still but one chin and that a good one.

"Yvette," he whispered—not even her mother heard him, though she had always an ear that way—"Yvette! You're very beautiful to-night."

Yvette just lowered her lashes. They were long and touched her cheek with a suggestion of shyness. A smile stirred the corner of her mouth. She did not speak. She knew how it went, that game.

"Suppose," said Whiting very softly, "you put me out of my agony to-night—Yes or no? Are you listening, Yvette?"

Yvette bent her head a very little to say that she was listening. The real old lace above her heart lifted and fell quite evenly. She did not flush.

"Will you?" said Whiting. At least in his throat the breath caught nervously. "Will you, Yvette?"

It was a queer question to ask while Marguerite bedizened her matronly self with earrings and necklaces. Whiting, perhaps, realized the queerness of it, for he leaned a little nearer and touched Yvette's scarf reverently with the tips of his fingers.

"It's been going on a long time—with me," he said. "Nothing new—as you know."

Yvette folded her hands in her lap. She looked at the stage—and she looked back over her shoulder into Whiting's eyes. If you had been reared with the end in view of some day entering upon a certain road, you would not, when that road unfolded itself before your feet, draw back. Neither

did Yvette. She took her first step between its orderly hedges, naturally enough, without excitement.

"I know," she said, very softly in her turn.

"You will?" said Whiting incredulous to the last adoring fiber of his being.

"Yes," said Yvette. She was not at all slow about it.

And that was the great moment, come and gone, without any blare of trumpets, while Marguerite ogled herself before a mirror, and the devil loitered redly in the background coquetting with Dame Martha.

Mrs. de la Fuente received the news with radiance.

"Dear little one," she said, "I had hoped for it. He is most charming—in every way eligible—not a Creole, of course, but there are really many delightful people up-town. I am confident you will be happy. For the trousseau, of course, you will have Marie."

"I had not thought of the trousseau," said Yvette.

"Ah youth! youth!" sighed Mrs. de la Fuente sentimentally. "Color of rose, and another color—of the loved one's eyes."

"I had not thought of that, either," said Yvette, quite truthfully.

When she stood once more before the mirror of her dressing table and lit the candles, she looked at herself with a vague interest. After a while she drew the back of one hand lightly across her lips. Whiting had kissed her in the discreet moment when Mrs. de la Fuente, mounting the stairs, had left them alone together.

The lips were softly crimson, much as usual, but Yvette standing between the candles stared at them curiously, somewhat as though she expected a scar.

She was not given to analysis of her emotions, Yvette. She only stared and sighed, and presently undressed herself, and went to bed with a queer little smile twisting one corner of her mouth. She did not sleep very much, it is true, but an engagement involves a certain amount of excitement not conducive to slumber, and Yvette had not expected to sleep.

Next day she was none the worse for wear, and went upon her way with considerable calm.

Also, when Whiting next kissed her, she neglected subsequently to erase it. She was nothing like so ardent as he, it is true,

but then as she explained to him with a lovely indifference, ardor is not the woman's part.

"You care the most?" said Yvette. "Naturally. It *should* be like that."

"H'mph!" said Whiting. After those brief crucial moments at the opera, he had regained something of his usual poise—a delightfully humorous sophistication not untouched with cynicism. "I dare say—balance of power—eh?"

"There is an old French proverb," said Yvette, turning her winking solitaire about a cool white finger, "which says that there is always one who kisses and one who—how do you say?—one who presents the check. It is true, I suppose. And it should be the man who kisses. Otherwise he might grow tired."

"H'mph!" said Whiting again. "There's something in that, of course—for flirtations—and episodes. This thing of ours goes a bit deeper—eh? I can't seem to see myself getting tired in case you—well, in case you ever decided to take the initiative. Mind being kissed, Yvette?"

"But that is absurd!" said Yvette, smiling.

"Yes—of course," said Whiting. He stroked his clean-shaven chin, which was as yet but one chin, and looked at Yvette out of keen, clear, gray eyes. His own smile had a winning kindliness, but it came slow. "Of course," he repeated. "By nature you're a trifle cold, I fancy—that's all."

Yvette looked at him swiftly and looked away.

"Queer!" said Whiting, "your eyes, now—but you wouldn't have said you'd marry me unless you cared—Yvette?"

"Why should you suppose—" Yvette began haughtily.

"You're very beautiful," said Whiting, "and you're young. It's incredible that you shouldn't have stirred up a grand passion, somehow. I don't want to be insistent about it, but, my dear girl, don't for God's sake decide to marry me for any reason but the one I've mentioned! You'd do yourself a very cruel injustice."

"You seem to think," said Yvette, "that it is impossible I should—care—for—you."

"Not impossible," said Whiting quietly. "An exquisite miracle, if you like. Nothing's impossible. But I can't seem to believe in my own happiness—and I wish it might

sometimes occur to you to touch me of your own accord." Then he asked a strange question. "Ever been anybody else, Yvette?"

And Yvette said what every woman says when she feels the wall at her back.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Any other man?" said Whiting slowly. "At any stage of the game?"

Said Yvette: "I have known a great many men."

And said Whiting: "Yes, of course, that's what I was thinking. Any of 'em leave a scar?"

A scar, you will remember, was what Yvette had looked for on her lips. Not having found it, she probably felt justified now in smiling and shaking her head.

"Thank God!" said Whiting rather suddenly.

Yvette turned pale.

Afterwards, when she remembered the conversation, she gave audience to a ghost by way of corollary; but nothing resulted, and the trousseau went forward triumphantly. Mrs. de la Fuente swam in satisfaction like a trout in a purling stream. She designed gowns and matched laces. She hobnobbed with dressmakers, and bullied seamstresses. The line of a hat was in her dreams by night, and the argot of the sewing room was on her tongue by day. All of this demanded money, and to obtain that money certain of Mrs. de la Fuente's diamonds found their way into the loan-shops. Yvette protested vainly.

"I do not wish, mama, that you should ruin yourself."

But Mrs. de la Fuente was obdurate.

"In my trousseau were two dozen of everything. Upon my petticoats even was real lace—and the veil of my grandmother—Dear little one, will you have it draped back or falling before the face?"

When Yvette had no definite desire to express upon this point, her mother reproached her tragically.

"Is it that you do not care? Unnatural child! I remember that I was mad with excitement for weeks before my wedding. I knew to a fold how I wished the veil to fall. I shed tears if a tuck too much was placed upon a skirt—and I had but fifteen years."

"Did you perhaps hide your doll beneath the steps of the altar?" inquired Yvette. Then she kissed her mother upon the cheek and smiled. She might have been the

lovely elder sister of that other little girl in veil and orange blossoms.

"At least," said Mrs. de la Fuente, sighing before the hopelessness of Yvette's disinterest, "your papa approved. He found me wonderfully gowned. All men have eyes for chiffons upon a woman they love. Tonce will know if your veil is badly draped."

"And will he punish me, do you think?" asked Yvette. "Will he perhaps beat me, mama?"

She put on her hat while her mother was still scolding, wrapped herself in great soft black furs that accentuated the clearness of her coloring, and went out to motor with Whiting upon a wintry road. Those were not unhappy days.

Then the man came back. I believe there is a saying that this feat is not possible. Still, he came. His name was Douglas Hays, and Whiting brought him to call one Sunday afternoon.

Yvette, coming into the drawing-room, halted a very little in her slow gracious step. Her eyes when they first fell upon his face widened and darkened. Perhaps a slow flush burned across her cheek. But she gave her hand unhesitatingly. Yvette had race.

"Yvette," said Whiting, "may I present Mr. Hays? Miss de la Fuente, Mr. Hays."

And Yvette smiled.

"I think," she said, "that I remember Mr. Hays. The year I came out—was it not?"

Mr. Hays smiled in his turn, but somewhat stiffly. His surprise wrote itself almost imperceptibly upon a lean, sun-burned face. His eyes in that brown inscrutable setting were bright and blue like jewels, but the line of his mouth was hard.

"You've met before?" said Whiting in pleasant inquiry.

"Quite some time ago," the other man admitted, equally upon the surface of things. "It's good of you to remember me—Miss de la Fuente." Only to Yvette's conscious ear did the slight hesitation suggest that he stumbled over the formal appellation.

"I never forget names," said Yvette indolently, and added as his eyes met hers, "but I have a dreadful memory—for faces. I am not sure I should have known——"

"Possibly I've changed," he suggested.

Whiting, from a corner of the davenport, put in an idle our.

"Men of your type don't change a great deal, under, say fifty."

At which the two men crossed glances, courteously enough.

"Why, no," said Yvette, "you have not changed—as I remember you."

"Nor you," said Hays almost significantly.

"Mr. Hays," said Whiting, in the ensuing pause, "is a stranger in a strange land, Yvette. Never been here but once before. I've asked him to see 'Aïda' with us to-morrow night."

"That will be charming," said Yvette.

"It's very good of you," said Hays.

"You'll find the old Opera House interesting," said Whiting. He stood up slowly. "Think by any chance I'd find your mother in the library, Yvette? I've a message for her from my sister."

"All afternoon," said Yvette calmly, "she has been in the library with a volume of de Maupassant. One fancies she will be there still, Tony."

And Tony went out with a nod and a smile. The curtains fell to behind him.

Then the other man spoke. He leaned forward in his chair, elbows upon his knees, hands interlocked, and looked a little mockingly at his hostess.

"Hello, Yvette!" he said, as if he had not seen her before. The words were flippant, almost with a touch of impertinence.

Yvette looked back at him straightly. Nevertheless, an uncontrollable excitement stained her cheeks.

"You have not changed," she said, "in the least. You were always daring."

"Dear me, yes!" he agreed. "Why not? The ladies like it, God bless 'em!" Then, very suddenly, he dropped his smiling pose.

"I had no idea," he told her, "that it was you I was to see. Whiting mentioned no names. You believe me?"

"You know him well?" asked Yvette.

"I hadn't seen him in years until to-day. I knew him back East." He added curiously, "And you?"

"We are to be married," said Yvette.

"Oh!" said Hays. A little thereafter he smiled. "I congratulate him."

"Thank you," said Yvette.

Then the man looked into Yvette's eyes, and found them deep.

"Clean forgotten everything?" he suggested coolly.

"What was there to forget?" she asked him.

"Never dig in the ashes?" he hinted.

"Ashes are cold and uninteresting," said Yvette.

She smiled, too. When he stared a little rudely, she smiled the sweeter.

"It is almost impossible," she apologized, "to remember everything, across four years. I dare say there are a great many things of which you are thinking, that I have forgotten. One meets so many men when one is a debutante——"

"I should like to stake my reputation, of which I am excessively jealous," said Hays, "that you have *not* forgotten. There are some things which one does not forget, and *die erste Liebe* is one of them."

"Were you that?"

"I," said he, "was that—however unworthily."

Yvette shrugged.

When she did not speak the lines of Hays' face changed swiftly. A compelling youth spoke from his eyes, and the whimsical, lifting corners of his mouth. It was the look Yvette remembered.

"I've never changed," he said. "Believe me, Yvette——"

And at that juncture, rather appropriately, Whiting came back into the room.

"I found your mother," he said cheerfully, "and de Maupassant. Have you two revived your *auld lang syne*?"

Whiting's roses came next day upon the heels of Hays' less prodigal valley lilies.

Yvette wore the roses to the opera—and put the valley lilies in her room.

After the first act of "Aïda," she questioned Whiting's pleasant hospitality abruptly.

"Tony—you know Mr. Hays well?"

Whiting shrugged. He drew his chair a little nearer, and lowered his voice.

"Fairly well, not intimately. Likable chap, eh? Something of a gallant cavalier. Where did you know him?"

"He went about with the La Branches the winter I came out," said Yvette.

"Like him?" asked Whiting carelessly. "By the way, I've asked him to a little dinner I'm having next week—for you."

"A dinner you're having for me?" said Yvette.

"Thought you'd like it—an old friend and all that," said Whiting. He sat back in his chair as the curtain rose.

Yvette heard very little of the music that night.

When she went home, she put the bowl of valley lilies downstairs in the library on the plea that their perfume was too heavy.

"It sickens me," she said, more or less truthfully.

Another thing she did was not so wise. She resurrected from a box in the depths of a clothes-closet a package of letters and read them through deliberately. The dawn came in at the window when she had finished. They were long letters, for the most part, and there were rather a number of them. The last one was enlightening.

"I accept your decision," it said carefully, "but I can't help believing that this is not the end. Suppose we call it tomorrow's tangle, and trust to Fate to unravel it. You may be right. In any case, there is nothing more now for me to say. You have closed the subject."

"It was a very easy acceptance—of my decision," said Yvette to herself. "He never cared. If he had——"

Without finishing the sentence she went to bed, just as the streets were waking. She did not go to sleep at once, but then when she did she slept till noon, which somewhat recompensed her.

It is not one of the conditions for a successful betrothal that memories return.

Yvette was unhappy.

She endeavored to be natural with Whiting, and succeeded in displaying to his keen gray eyes an undue effusiveness. She endeavored to be natural with Hays, and by her resultant coldness convinced him easily that she was afraid of the old feeling. She endeavored to be natural with her mother, who had memories of her own concerning Hays and her daughter and was therefore pacing the watch-tower, and succeeded only in arousing in the maternal breast a small simoon of anxiety.

In herself, Yvette was prey to a variety of emotions. Her nerves wore to fiddle-strings, and her nights were sleepless tread-mills. She desired to be loyal to Whiting, but the lure of the first love called her insidiously. Also she said to herself—as does many another beloved one—that matrimony allows one no rain checks, and having purchased a ticket one must willy-nilly sit through the entire performance or go forth into outer darkness with no prospect of returning.

The thing faintly alarmed her—for the first time.

In contradistinction to each other she placed certain reluctant facts.

Whiting was nearing middle age. Hays was in the very prime of youth, daring, denied and dark—three potent D's.

Whiting loved her. Hays might or might not—a fact entirely in his favor by the very beauty of its uncertainty.

Whiting's hair was ebbing and his waist-coat obtained an almost imperceptible prominence. Hays was lithe as an Indian, and his hair thick as leaves at Vallombrosa.

Add to this: Whiting had money. Hays had not.

This last line is, of course, an inconsiderable factor. Another obscure line of reasoning is that she had given her word to Whiting; and once, a long four years ago, she had refused it to Hays who had accepted that refusal, as his conduct had instigated it, without enormous regret.

Yvette, as I said, was unhappy.

She saw Hays often, and he made love to her so cleverly that only her wish which was perhaps the paternal progenitor of her thought could have been sure just what he was doing.

Also, she saw Whiting, seven days out of the week, and he made love to her less subtly, at the same time arranging ways by which the other man should have his opportunity.

"I'd like you to see something of Hays," said Whiting on one occasion. "You don't dislike him, do you?"

"On the contrary," said Yvette; but just how much on the contrary she neglected, quite naturally, to add.

Hays himself urged the question with rather more effect. Having come back, he desired to pick up the threads that his departure had broken. Yvette, more poised, more sought after, more delicately experienced in every way, appealed strongly to his appreciation. Possibly that appreciation acquired something of its fervency from the fact that Yvette was now behind the plate-glass window of another's prospective ownership. Men are like that. In any case, the appreciation was fervent, and its expression unmistakable. At first, for a little, he fenced, he experimented for the weak spot in her armor, and he fired from ambush. Then he came boldly into the open.

"You loved me once," he said. "You women don't forget."

"I cannot listen to you," Yvette rebuffed him uneasily.

"You could listen fast enough if you'd forgotten."

Which shot went home, and Yvette winced.

"You're afraid," he said, "that I can make you care again."

"I am afraid of nothing," said Yvette. But she would not look at him.

"Yvette," he said, with sudden passion, "it's like a flame consuming me, for all I thought myself so strong. I've forgotten all the other women I ever knew, and they've been more than two or three. You cared once—you've got to care again."

His hand shook while he said it, and it was true that Yvette had cared—once. There you have the makings of a very probable *de capo*, but time passed without a climax, and it came to be the night of the little dinner which Whiting was having for Yvette. He had it in his bachelor apartments, with Mrs. de la Fuente an imposing evidence of propriety at the head of the table.

In the center of the table which was lit with rosy-shaded candles was a bank of pale orchids, and around the table—it was rather small—were Whiting, Yvette and Hays. I have said that Mrs. de la Fuente presided.

"But Tony," said Yvette, a little nervously perhaps, "are we your only guests?"

"Why, there's a camaraderie, I think, about these little dinners," said Whiting.

There was, however, small camaraderie about that little dinner. Mrs. de la Fuente alone talked determinedly and lightly on many subjects. Yvette ate little, and laughed a good deal. For the two men, Whiting was cheerfully silent, and Hays taciturn. The courses came and went, and eventually dinner was over. When the coffee cups were empty, Whiting led the way to his library.

"There's a fire," he said, "an open fire, which I find is always first aid to sociability."

About a quarter of an hour later he appealed to Mrs. de la Fuente.

"I have been hoping all day that you would play for us."

Mrs. de la Fuente rose with a pleased flutter.

"Ah, but I am old-fashioned," she protested, "I have not the music of to-day."

"I don't know your equal," said Whiting, "for 'Lucia' and 'Aida' and 'Trovatore'—all the real tunes."

He led her to the grand piano which occupied almost all of the room adjoining the library, and then came back to the fire.

"*Celeste Aida*" followed him, sighing upon the air.

"Well!" said Whiting, pleasantly conversational. He stood with his back to the fire, one hand in the pocket of his trousers, and looked from Yvette to Hays.

"Well, what, Tony?" said Yvette.

Hays crossed his legs, and looked at the fire.

"What have you decided?" asked Whiting.

"I!" said Yvette. She said it sharply, being startled.

"And Hays," said Whiting. He spoke quietly, beneath the music.

Then Hays looked at Yvette.

"What d'you mean?" he inquired, "I don't quite get you, my dear fellow. Is it a joke?"

"Shall I explain?" asked Whiting.

"If you please," said Yvette, her chin lifting proudly.

"I fancy," said Whiting after a considering pause, "it won't be any too easy. Still, I've arranged this little dinner with a view to explanations, where two or three are gathered together, y'know—Yvette, have you ever found me unreasonable?"

"No," said Yvette.

"Or exacting?"

"No."

"Or unfair?"

"No—no!" She answered vehemently.

"Then you will answer a question if I ask it?"

"I will answer any question," said Yvette, "you choose to ask me."

"Thanks," said Whiting. He turned curtly to Hays.

"Never knew me to be anything but square, did you?"

"So far as I know," said Hays with the barest trace of a sneer.

"Then you will answer a question?"

"Concerning whom?"

"Concerning us three," said Whiting quietly. He added, lifting his voice a trifle, "Ah, don't stop, Mrs. de la Fuente! Give us the immortal sextet."

"I will answer any question," said Hays to Yvette, "that you wish me to answer."

"Good!" said Whiting cheerfully. "Now then—here's the thing in a nut-shell." He spoke swiftly, but rather low. "Do either or both of you wish me to release Yvette from her promise to marry me?"

The fire of seasoned logs crackled like thorns beneath a pot, and the immortal sextet flooded the room with melody. Otherwise ensued a silence.

"You're pretty frank, aren't you?" said Hays at length.

Yvette said nothing, only looked.

"It would hardly escape me," said Whiting, still with the same pleasant quiet, "that this is a triangle. Your firm sent you here, Hays, a couple of weeks ago. I had heard of you before you came. Gossip dies hard. I had heard that you were once extremely attentive to Miss de la Fuente. You're young, you're interesting, you have it on me every way but one. I wanted to be absolutely fair to the lady who had done me the honor to accept me, so I saw that she met you again—I saw that she met you rather frequently. I gave you every chance. I knew that old affairs sometimes rejuvenate themselves. You'll admit you've had fair play?"

He looked from Hays to Yvette, and back again. Yvette sat very still, all her delicate color faded, her dark eyes fixed on Whiting's face.

And in the other room, Mrs. de la Fuente began on "Travatore."

"A blind man couldn't help but see," said Whiting coolly, "that there was something—Am I in the way, Yvette? My dear, it's your happiness I'm considering."

"Do you ask me," said Hays all at once, "if you are in the way—is that your question?"

"I do not," said Whiting slowly, and for the first time the steel in his quiet eyes showed through, "because I am not con-

sidering you at all, unless it happens that she wants you."

Yvette locked her two hands tightly together in her lap, and kept silent. Doubtless *die erste Liebe* stirred in its grave, and doubtless the heart in her breast leaped with the old exultant urge of the skin-clad woman who beheld from an upper ledge two men belaboring each other upon her cave-step.

Woman is the one element the ages cannot altogether refine.

While she waited:

"Yvette!" said Hays hoarsely. (And here is the hinge of the story—so far as it was in the man, he really loved her.)

But Whiting, without speaking, moved a peacock-embroidered screen a little forward to shield her face from the blaze.

Then Yvette drew a long breath. She lifted dark glorious eyes to Whiting's waiting look, and her lip trembled.

She said:

"Do not be silly, Tony." That was all. Apparently, however, it was enough.

"Then that's settled," said Whiting, and he also drew a long breath. He had been under something of a strain.

"I fancy you'll forgive me if I leave early," said Hays. He went, with distinctly more dignity than might have been expected. He had come back, and he had not come back—which is an engaging paradox.

Then Whiting sat upon the arm of Yvette's big chair, a thing not every lover of forty years can do with grace, and laid his arm about Yvette's proud shoulders. It is preeminently the gesture of ownership.

"I was afraid, Yvette," he said softly. "My dear, I was damnably afraid."

And Yvette—even as you and I—Yvette stood in the line of direct descent from Eve—"Ah, Tony," she said, "you might have had more—how do you say?—more faith in me!"

And what is stranger yet, she meant it.

